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ABSTRACT

Conventional approaches to teaching and learning perpetrate lies about the nature of knowledge, self-worth, and growth. Working with Foxfire and authentic assessment can offer teachers an opportunity to discover emancipating truths. These approaches demonstrate the value of students' growth in their own competence and in their self-direction. The practice of presenting information in an organized pattern and testing for comprehension tells the learner the lie that knowledge is the acquisition of another person's thinking and work. As teachers grow in their comprehension of the vastness of knowledge available, it is only natural that they shrink in their sense of self-worth. Teachers need to be trusted to construct knowledge from their experiences and from new concepts offered to them, rather than having educational changes dictated to them. (JDD)

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FOSTERING STUDENT AND TEACHER COMPETENCE
EXPOSING THE LIES

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I have been on a quest during my ten years of public school teaching to become the best educator I could be, but is the past two years that have brought me the most satisfaction. My work with Foxfire and authentic assessment that has given me a vision that has changed my view of teaching, learning, and the very nature of class work itself. I have seen that conventional approaches perpetrate lies about the nature of knowledge, self-worth, and growth. Discovering truth there, under my nose, in my very classroom has been an emancipation and a validation of my ability to work out this complex thing called education. I am free now to work differently with my students and with educators outside my classroom. Further, I see connections between classroom lies, and the broader lies that are perpetrated upon everyone in the name of education.

In the frenetic year that followed my initial exposure to Foxfire practices, I learned something important from everything my students and I did together. I learned that I could not keep track of as many things as I thought I could from the building of class rules - a different set for each group; from the videotaping of class-written and produced plays, I learned that equipment shortages can become the tail that wags the educational dog; from the class study of child psychology, the enchanting children's literature the students wrote thereafter, and the experiences they had in reading their works to mentally retarded children, I learned the rich lessons in layering educational experiences; from the decision-making process they experienced in choosing a controversial play, convincing the administration to support their production, and dealing with the mixed feelings that followed a parent's request that they abandon the production, I learned that positive, real-world lessons exist

1

in many guises. I learned to trust the process and to help them do the same. Further, I learned that student choice, a natural for getting them involved in their own learning, works best in partnership with adults they trust to guide them.

One year was hardly enough to work through the changes I was experiencing, yet it was the next summer that I began work with the Four Seasons Project. Knowledge of authentic assessment has sharpened my focus on kids as the real raw material of education. By seeing the value of growth in what they know of their own competence, and growth in the amount of self-direction they exercise in effecting personal change, I have refocused my educational camera. It still includes active, involved kids, but the lens now incorporates a personal quest by each individual to ferret out strengths and develop both self-knowledge and direction.

If that camera were to take pictures of my class, the results would show a colorful blur of people, projects and introspection on the process. I believe those pictures would reflect truths that were formerly missing in my work with kids. It is through the user-friendly nature of my students' work that I now see the lies that conventional education perpetrates on all.

My first insight was that *capture text* may work for computers, but it lies to people. I mastered the rather miraculous command while fumbling my way through telecommunications. I found that by invoking it, anything that appeared on-line - discussions of issues, messages to me or messages I sent to others, examples of my designs for authentic assessments or those designed by others - could be saved for later review and further work. The dual practice of presenting information in

an organized pattern and testing for comprehension assumes that people, too, can operate efficiently in this mode. It tells the learner that knowledge is the acquisition of another person's thinking and work. In the lie, resides a sense of possession of, or dominance over, the material. The lie to those who acquiesce is that they know a lot, and they are smart; the lie to those who do not is the devastating opposite.

Other lies accompany it. The teacher, who has been *capturing text* for years of formal education beyond those of the student deserves respect, homage and their trust because of the vast amount of text captured. Those who capture diligently can be compared to each other in knowledge and worth by testing them on how much of the material they can produce.

I had believed the lie myself in years past when I took every training available to become a good teacher. Among other things, I could structure a lecture according to Madeline Hunter, I could run a literary discussion using Shared Inquiry, I could achieve compliant behavior through Assertive Discipline, and I could secure good ratings of my teaching by knowing the Florida Performance Measurement System.

Where was I in all this competence? Rather than being present, I was lost in the lie that competence comes from possessing others' truths. From the vantage point of this realization, I looked back on my view of self as a student from kindergarten through graduate school and saw the gradual disassociation between who I was and what I was learning. As I grew in my comprehension of the vastness of knowledge available, it was only natural to shrink in my sense of self worth.

The theme insinuated itself into many aspects of my life outside the classroom. While facilitating a county-level committee comprised of teachers and administrators, I asked the members to share their best and worst learning experiences from any point in their lives. I had expected results similar to my introspection on the question which had drawn me back to a high school chorus experience. The teacher had asked me to choreograph the school play, something about which I knew absolutely nothing. Through an integrated and layered process of learning, self discovery, and interpersonal work, I figured out how to do it, did it, taught others the dances, and held my breath through the performance to see whether it had worked. I learned a lot more than how to choreograph through that experience. I learned to trust me ability to do something complex and scary.

As the members shared, ghosts of larger-than-live teachers appeared from the childhood experiences. Common themes emerged: 1) the good teachers were viewed as strikingly different in competence from other teachers remembered; 2) a enormous competence gap existed between the child's sense of self at the time and the competence he or she saw in the teacher; and 3) the poor teachers were viewed as damaging to the child's sense of self. The members had surprised me. I had expected them to share empowering experiences that included complex learning and self-discovery; instead they carried around with them faces and personalities from their past.

From that committee meeting, I learned that it is not only kids that impose a large competence space between themselves and their teachers; administrators and teachers see the gulf as natural and even motivating

4

as long as teachers do not abuse their position of power. That is another lie. It lies to kids because it says that they should work on becoming something alien to themselves.

Education as a whole may have a long way to go in changing the culture of the classroom and the support system for it, yet in looking back at the pilgrimage I have made in two years, I see in myself the kind of change other teachers are capable of making. To many teachers, conversation about new approaches raise hackles of skepticism, yet those same teachers are easily engaged in rich discussion about students' needs.

One of the most important aspects of my development is the nature and type of support I have received. I have been trusted to construct knowledge from my experiences and new concepts offered to me, and my work has been supported through various structures designed to connect me with others. I do not think that most classroom teachers have experienced such self-affirming approaches to classroom improvement. Most educational change has been dictated from above, with teachers expected to operate in the *capture text* mode. For them to see the lies residing in the system they, too, must experience the truth.